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ABSTRACT

This is the transcript of the "Focus on Refugees," program conducted by the Overseas Development Council. Remarks from the following participants are included: (1) Sarah Brandel, Associate Fellow at the Overseas Development Council; (2) Gary Perkins, Chief of Mission of the Washington Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); (3) John Tenhula, Consultant to the Immigration and Refugee Program of Church World Service; and (4) Harry Ellis, Deputy Bureau Chief of the Washington Bureau of the "Christian Science Monitor." In a question and answer format, several issues concerning the world refugee problem are covered. The discussion touches on refugee resettlement patterns in the third world, (especially Africa and Southeast Asia), difficulties involved in providing aid to refugees in their countries of resettlement, legal determination of refugee status, and the role of developed nations in resettlement. Long term prospects for the refugee situation are outlined in terms of present economic and political trends. (APM)

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FOCUS

Transcript
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FOCUS on Refugees

Mr. Waters: Welcome to FOCUS. I'm Mike Waters. This week the program is presented by the Overseas Development Council, one of seven nonprofit nonpartisan organizations that bring you the FOCUS series. This week we're looking at the situation of refugees in the Third World. Our guests are Sarah Brandel, Associate Fellow at the Overseas Development Council, and author of Refugees: New Dimensions to an Old Problem:

> "Economic development in the Third World will be a contribution--long-run--toward the political stability which will permit people to live and to stay at home and not to fear persecution."

And with Sarah Brandel is Gary Perkins, Chief of Mission of the Washington Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR):

> "There's a tendency for us to have a mental image of a refugee as a starving person with few skills and little natural talent. This is certainly not the case. A refugee can be a lawyer, a doctor, a businessman. I have on the wall of my office a rather poignant photo. It's a picture of Albert Einstein, and underneath it says simply "Einstein was a refugee."

Also on our panel, John Tenhula, Consultant to the Immigration and Refugee Program of Church World Service:

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"Refugees don't want to be separated from their culture, their language, their traditions. They want to return."

Our moderator is Harry Ellis, Deputy Bureau Chief of the Washington Bureau of the Christian Science Monitor. Mr. Ellis.

Mr. Ellis: When I first began working in the Middle East as a correspondent in 1952, I wrote often about the plight of the Palestine refugees, and of course that problem has persisted now more than 30 years. I cite it only to illustrate the persistence of a refugee problem and the way in which it affects the internal policies, politics, and economies of other nations--in that particular case Lebanon, Jordan, and to some extent Syria and Israel. Against that background, I'd like to come up to the present. To many Americans the refugee problem right now is symbolized by the numbers of Cubans and Vietnamese and, to a smaller extent, Haitians who have recently been coming to the United States. Let me ask first of all, Ms. Brandel, does the United States do disproportionately more than other nations to help refugees?

Ms. Brandel: I would say that the United States is out front in accepting the greatest number of refugees for permanent resettlement in the United States. On a per capita basis, the United States is joined by a number of European countries, Australia, and Canada, who settle--proportionately again--a large number of refugees. But when you look at the total number of refugees worldwide--perhaps as many as 16 million--fully 90 per cent of those refugees remain in the Third World, obviously not coming to the United States.

Mr. Ellis: Does that mean, Mr. Perkins, from the vantage point of your United Nations office, that the worldwide refugee problem is primarily a

problem which has to do with Third World countries rather than with developed countries?

Mr. Perkins: Yes, I think that's true. To give you an example, I worked for two and a half years in Botswana in the southern part of Africa. In a matter of weeks, Botswana was obliged to accept a number of refugees which was equivalent to ten per cent of their total population (the equivalent in United States terms would be 25 million people). Despite the fact that Botswana is a developing country, they accepted these people, they granted them land, and this particular group stayed there for three years prior to their repatriation to their country of origin. So, in answer to your question, certainly the majority of refugees do exist in Third World countries, and the majority of refugees will never be resettled outside of that country of first asylum and certainly not in the United States.

Mr. Ellis: To go on from there just for a moment, how does one distinguish between a refugee and a migrant, either a legal or illegal migrant?

Mr. Perkins: We make a very firm decision; our definition is a part of U.N. and international law. We attempt to decide whether a person who is applying for refugee status or asylum has what we call "a well-founded fear of persecution" for a variety of reasons. We feel that, as a U.N. agency, we have to be fairly strict about the application of this definition. There is a difference between someone attempting to seek a new life for economic reasons, as a migrant would, and a person who has to leave his country because a member of his family was killed or perhaps because he's been in jail. Now there may be very excellent reasons for people to leave their country, and sometimes there's tremendous difficulty in proving that well-founded fear of persecution, but for us the difference remains and we have a fairly

strict application of that definition.

Mr. Ellis: Shortly we'll focus our attention on problems created by refugees within Third World countries, but first, Mr. Tenhula, many Americans feel that there are strains set up within U.S. society when refugees such as the Cubans or the Vietnamese come in. What kinds of strains are these?

Mr. Tenhula: The strains that you're referring to are real. They come at a time when our unemployment is high and our housing and a lot of other resources seem to be getting scarcer each year. If you will look at the way the Indochinese refugees have been accepted into the United States (some 460,000 since May of 1975). They've clustered themselves, and they are living in certain areas of the country. This puts a tremendous strain on local resources. I would cite Orange County, California with the Indochinese and Miami, Florida with the Cubans. What happens, for example, when you wake up one morning and 130,000 Cubans are on your shores? That means 16,500 new children in the Dade County public school system. There are health considerations, too: Last year in Orange County, with a population of 25,000 Indochinese, there were five medical doctors that were bilingual. These are tremendous pressures on the local community, and I think some of the burden has not been shared equally. This is a federal responsibility. We have federal laws that invite people to become citizens in this country. We have a responsibility to reimburse communities around the country that experience these financial problems.

Mr. Ellis: I'd like to come back a bit later to this aspect of international cooperation, but I'm struck, Ms. Brandel, by what these gentlemen have said about the difficulties of settling refugees even in developed

countries. I should think that the problems would be enormously magnified when very poor refugees are going into another country, such as a Third World African or Asian country, which is itself extremely poor.

Ms. Brandel: The arrival of large numbers of refugees in rural areas in the poorest developing countries right away puts tremendous pressure on scarce natural resources, whether that resource be water, agricultural land, or access to foodstuffs. The presence of refugees immediately puts them into a kind of competition with the local communities. That kind of tension, then, can either be ameliorated with outside help, or it can in fact extend to national capitals. When local communities look to the national capital for assistance if the government is not able to respond, that again sets off a whole set of political tensions.

Mr. Ellis: What about the threat to security? Mr. Perkins. To go back to the Middle East, I know that in Lebanon (where I lived for a number of years) it ultimately developed that the very presence of the refugees was a threat which disrupted political life and was a contributing factor to the wars which have wracked Lebanon. In the experience of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees Office, is this a threat which is relatively widespread or not? In other words, do som of these refugees--perhaps the Afghans today, as they go into Pakistan--come in with the avowed intention of keeping up their struggle against, in this case, the Soviet invader, so that they become a disruptive security threat within the host country?

Mr. Perkins: I think that's certainly true. I'd like to draw a slight distinction, and that is that the particular organization I work for, UNHCR, does not work with Palestinians. That's a separate U.N. agency,

and I don't wish to answer for them. But yes, if you take the example of Pakistan, if you take examples in southern Africa, clearly when you have large numbers of people who are just across the border, this places a lot of political strain on the relations between the two countries. What we do in effect is attempt to provide some stability within a very unstable situation. UNHCR's role in this is both physical and political. We will only work with groups that are not pursuing an active struggle. In other words, we will take care of the women and the children, and if the men wish to pursue their struggle, that's entirely up to them and their country of first asylum, but it's not part of our policy to assist them. Secondly, we will not establish camps on a border. We have insisted, and I think in a very reasonable fashion, on moving these camps away from the border. In so doing, and in providing for a population which cannot provide for itself, we do play a stabilizing role in a very limited way in many of these countries.

Mr. Ellis: Let's move now to the question of international cooperation. We've been dealing with a number of aspects of this problem. You gentlemen represent different types of organizations. It might be helpful, Mr. Perkins, if you simply stated what I believe are the two functions of your office in dealing with refugees.

Mr. Perkins: Well, one is what we call the protective function, and that has a legal and a material assistance side. In effect we do for refugees what their own country would do for them in normal times. We provide travel documents, assist them in education, and try to protect them from being returned forceably to their country of origin. Now on the one side you have a legal role, which we perform through the United Nations and with governments

that are signatories to a convention regarding refugees. On the other side we have a major role in providing both funds and material goods to the refugees. Now when I talk about helping a refugee population by providing trucks, food, education, fuel--in so doing, we depend to a large extent on organizations such as that represented by Mr. Tenhula. These are, in this case in the United States, the American voluntary agencies. The refugee situation has grown so much in the last few years that we've gotten to a point in our own organization where we simply cannot and do not want to expand any further. We would much prefer to turn specific portions of our programs in other countries over to voluntary agencies, and this is the way things are developing. So while we will deal with government and create a master plan for relief, we would then say to, perhaps, Church World Service, or the Catholics, or whichever other voluntary agency was involved--please, do the health care, organize the educational side, and try to raise funds to do so. This is the sort of international network which we're trying to develop. We use volunteers extensively.

Mr. Ellis: Mr. Tenhula, can Church World Service and other voluntary organizations take on more?

Mr. Tenhula: Yes, I think we can. We bridge many, many gaps. I believe we can and should be involved in assisting UNHCR and other refugee-related organizations on an even greater scale internationally.

Mr. Ellis: Are your funds totally from voluntary contributions?

Mr. Tenhula: We accept a number of different funding sources; some U.S. AID program money does come in, and that is dependent upon what region of the world, what constituent organization is willing to accept certain

monies from certain parties. Primarily, though, it's the contributions of constituent denominations and ecumenical bodies--it's religious affiliations.

Mr. Ellis: One of you mentioned that the refugee total throughout the world is roughly 16 million, and that leads me to ask, first Ms. Brandel, if you look ahead over the next decade, how do you perceive that the refugee problem itself may change?

Ms. Brandel: I think it's going to continue rather than change. It's going to continue to be in the Third World and to involve the governments and peoples of the Third World. The international community, and perhaps the United States in particular, must increasingly adjust to this reality; I suppose that's one aspect in which it needs to change in the next few years. We've touched on the changing role of private voluntary organizations assuming greater responsibility in the field. I think the numbers themselves will continue to be large, if not grow.

Mr. Ellis: Partly, you mean, as a function of world population growth?

Ms. Brandel: That's correct.

Mr. Ellis: Mr. Perkins.

Mr. Perkins: I don't mean to be overly skeptical. (Occasionally I feel like a representative of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse.) I see, quite frankly, a continued growth of refugee problems in the world. Fortunately, at this point in time, they're not the same ones. The refugees which we cared for ten years ago--there's now an equivalent if not a greater number--are different populations. We're going through international changes, and the United States is a good example. The United States has done an absolutely superb job in terms of resettling people here.

Very large numbers have come into the United States. But you never considered, until last year, that you would be a country of first asylum. In the past, there's been a conscious decision to accept a certain number of refugees, and in many cases you had the possibility of actually interviewing these people before they came to your shores. In many ways the Refugee Act is framed on that basis. Suddenly, last year with the Cubans and possibly in the future with other refugees from the Caribbean region, you have become a country of first asylum. In other words, people that you were not aware of, with whom you had no previous contact, have come to your country seeking asylum. This is very, very new for the United States, but it's the same position Botswana or the Federal Republic of Germany or Austria or others have faced in the past.

Mr. Ellis: Mr. Tenhula, it seems to me from what Mr. Perkins said that a part of the problem of the future may be the effort by some governments to export their domestic problems onto the world community by forceable expulsion.

Mr. Tenhula: I think that's very true. I'm reminded of the words of a friend of mine, former Immigration Commissioner Lionel Castile. He said that for the next two decades, to the turn of the century, the United States is faced as never before with the Third World knocking at our door. He was highlighting Latin America and the Caribbean in particular. Who are we going to let in? Who are we going to call a refugee? And how are we going to deal with governments that use expulsion as a means of overcoming a domestic problem? How do we sort all this out? I think the numbers are going to increase vastly, and I think refugees are but a mere reflection of the world instability. It's easier to become a refugee today than ever before. The very definition, the very concept of asylum is being questioned in international circles.

Mr. Ellis: Ms. Brandel, to go on from that, does that mean that when a problem becomes acute in the international sense, as Vietnam or as Cuba from at least the American standpoint, there tends to be an inequitable flow of aid to different areas of the world? For example, the situation between Ethiopia and Somalia. Does that get as much attention as it should, given the fact that to most peoples in developed countries that problem has not been as forceably presented to them as was the problem in Indochina?

Ms. Brandel: Yes, I think that the refugees in the Cambodian-Thai situation clearly have received greater attention from the international community, greater financial support to date, than those on the Horn of Africa. How to remedy this is a challenge. There isn't an easy answer. Refugee flows are not predictable. They don't occur on a scheduled basis, so that for the international community to respond on an equitable basis will have to occur over time. One step in the right direction, I think, has been suggested by the United Nations agencies. If they had the resources at hand somewhat ahead of time, stocked away, they would be able to keep closer track and distribute resources more equitably among refugee populations.

Mr. Ellis: Do we, though, as a world community, have hold of the tail of a tiger in that we have seen the best international efforts have failed to solve certain problems which have created refugee situations? I think of the Arab-Israel dispute; the Indochinese situation, which is far from stabilized internally. We now have the Soviet Union in Afghanistan; Ethiopia and Somalia. Given the limitation that is possible for governments dealing with other sovereign governments, what might be done to

improve the way in which the world community tackles the refugee problems that we foresee in coming years? Mr. Tenhula?

Mr. Tenhula: Maybe we need to reflect just for a minute on how the world responds to any refugee situation. There are really three ways: You can assist refugees in countries of first asylum, you can help them repatriate voluntarily, and you can resettle them. And maybe there's a fourth: Perhaps you can prevent refugee situations from occurring by investing, by development aid, development assistance. We in the United States are conditioned to resettlement as a response, and I think the world community needs to gravitate away from that. Certainly there are groups of refugees who have no other possible solution but to be placed for resettlement in another country, but I would like to underline voluntary repatriation as a means for the international community to begin to respond in some wide-scale way. I'm also taken by the role the voluntary agencies can play in this. I'm thinking of Mozambique and the voluntary repatriation program that has taken place for refugees there who want to return to Zimbabwe. Lutheran World Federation, a voluntary agency, was responsible for the coordination of that. Refugees don't want to be separated from their culture, their language, their traditions. They want to return. And I think it's these kinds of programs that are a first step toward solving the global refugee crisis which you've been outlining and describing for all of us.

Mr. Ellis: But which, of course, depends upon the country of origin being willing to take them back. In the case of Zimbabwe, we seem to have a government which is perhaps more pragmatic than we would have dared hope. There are other cases where they simply is not the case. I believe,

Mr. Perkins, that you wanted to say something?

Mr. Perkins: Throughout the discussion there has been a tendency for us to have a mental image of a refugee as a starving person with few skills and little natural talent. This is certainly not the case. A refugee can be a lawyer, a doctor, a businessman. I have on the wall of my office a rather poignant photo. It's a picture of Albert Einstein, and underneath it says simply "Einstein was a refugee." Quite true.

Mr. Ellis: I'd like to go beyond what we have discussed, Ms. Brandel. I'm struck by the fact that all of you, one way or another, have spoken about the need for development assistance in Third World countries as one ingredient to alleviate or even prevent refugee problems from arising. Now this comes about at a time when the developed world--the rich nations of the "North," as we are sometimes called--as a whole are devoting less of our gross national product, of our national income, to helping poor nations than was the case previously. The United States certainly has a very poor record in this regard, and it looks as though bilateral foreign aid extended by the United States may decrease even further in the next few years. So is there a need to increase long-term development aid to poor nations of the world as a part of the solution or at least as a contribution to solving the refugee problem?

Ms. Brandel: Yes, I think as a contribution to solving the refugee problem. It's very true that development assistance can be a critical factor in encouraging developing country governments to pursue economic development for the benefit of their country's people, but development assistance traditionally has been but a small part of the global problem. The responsibility and future for the developing countries will depend again on

international cooperation, not so much in terms of development assistance but in terms of trade and more traditional complex economic interrelationships. Development assistance, as I say, can be a turning point, but it won't be the crucial factor. I think that economic development in the Third World will be a contribution--long-run--toward the political stability which will permit people, as Mr. Tenhula said, to live and to stay at home and not to fear persecution.

Mr. Ellis: Our time is just about up, but Ms. Brandel, one final question: Mr. Perkins raised the point that, of course, a number of refugees are skilled people who quickly become contributors to their host country. We know, for example, that was true of the German Jewish refugees who came to the United States during the Nazi period. But isn't it likely that it will be the Third World countries which will continue to attract the greatest number of unskilled or semi-skilled people who are in greatest need, whereas the developed nations, such as the Federal Republic of Germany or the United States or Canada, will tend to attract those people who will find it possible to integrate into the economies and social systems?

Ms. Brandel: You're absolutely right. Also, the European countries, given their distance from the refugee situations, as Mr. Perkins suggested, can make selections rather than simply have a large number of people arrive on the doorstep. Refugees in the Third World, while we might consider them unskilled, in many respects can come with very appropriate skills for the economic development of a Third World country. They may, in fact, be very skilled as farmers or as artisans and have a real contribution to make if welcomed and integrated into the host country, either on a very short-run basis or (in the few situation where necessary) on a longer-term basis.

So I think refugees can make a similar contribution, just in a very different economic setting.

Mr. Ellis: Thank you very much.

Mr. Waters: And our thanks to Harry Ellis and his guests: Sarah Brandel of the Overseas Development Council, Gary Perkins of the Washington Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, and John Tenhula of the Church World Service Refugee Program. Their discussion was edited for purposes of time. If you'd like a free transcript of this program, please write to FOCUS on Refugees, 1755 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20036. This program was prepared by the Overseas Development Council, one of seven nonpartisan nonprofit organizations that bring you the FOCUS series: The American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Brookings Institution, the Conservation Foundation, Resources for the Future, the Urban Institute, and the Wilson Center. The opinions expressed on the series are those of the individual participants and do not necessarily reflect an official position of any of their organizations, their staffs or trustees. This program was distributed by a special arrangement with its producers by Communications Center, the University of Texas at Austin. For FOCUS, I'm Mike Waters, inviting you to join us again next week.